

Whoopi Goldberg on *Ghost* and the Stevie Wonder School of Acting

The star who was named after a whoopee cushion talks to reporter Ian Horner.

Ghost was far more than a movie which suggested that pottery could be a lot more interesting than we ever thought. It combined humour, suspense, action, magnificent special effects and the promise of life after death. It also gave Whoopi Goldberg the role of a lifetime.

Goldberg was born Caryn Johnson but took her stage name from her constant high school companion, a whoopee cushion. During this interview there was a constant battle between the militant humanist and the gifted comic trying to get out between the lines. Both are vital parts of Goldberg and that's why films which only highlight one or the other have missed the mark.

During the interview Goldberg dumped all over Warner Bros, her government, our government and anyone else she could think of in passing but there were several hugely entertaining images along the way. Can you imagine her lining up to kick her heels with the all-white Radio City Hall Rockettes?

But first I asked her what it was like to play opposite an invisible man in *Ghost*. She put on her heavy black glasses and pondered the question.

Whoopi Goldberg: Well, for me it was the Stevie Wonder School of Acting. It was very peculiar, you know. We would be doing a great scene and Jerry [Zucker] would yell Cut! Cut! Cut! and we would like get an attitude: Why? Why? We were great! Because you were looking at 'im. We'd go oh, that's right. Oh, sorry!

I call it the Stevie Wonder School of Acting because that's exactly what it was. I had to do a lot of this [looking around] and look over here, look over there. It's very difficult because you wanna have a conversation but I wasn't allowed to. And Patrick [Swayze] did take advantage of the situation to sometimes make faces at me while I was working. And I died. It was too funny. Because I'd look over to say something and he'd mime in a silly way: "Hello!" It was funny. It was just tough the first week and then we sort of got it down. And funnily enough I found you'd just have

to look off-centre a little bit and you could still have the communication without the camera picking up that you're looking at the person.

Ian Horner: What drew you to the film in the first place?

WG: It's a fun script. It's very depressing in terms of the way that Sam dies, you know, it's sad and it's deep that way, but then here comes this very peculiar woman, you know, who turns out to be his medium and then it becomes sort of a high adventure which I really like. So I liked it because I knew I could sink my teeth into it.

IH: Are you happiest in comedic roles?

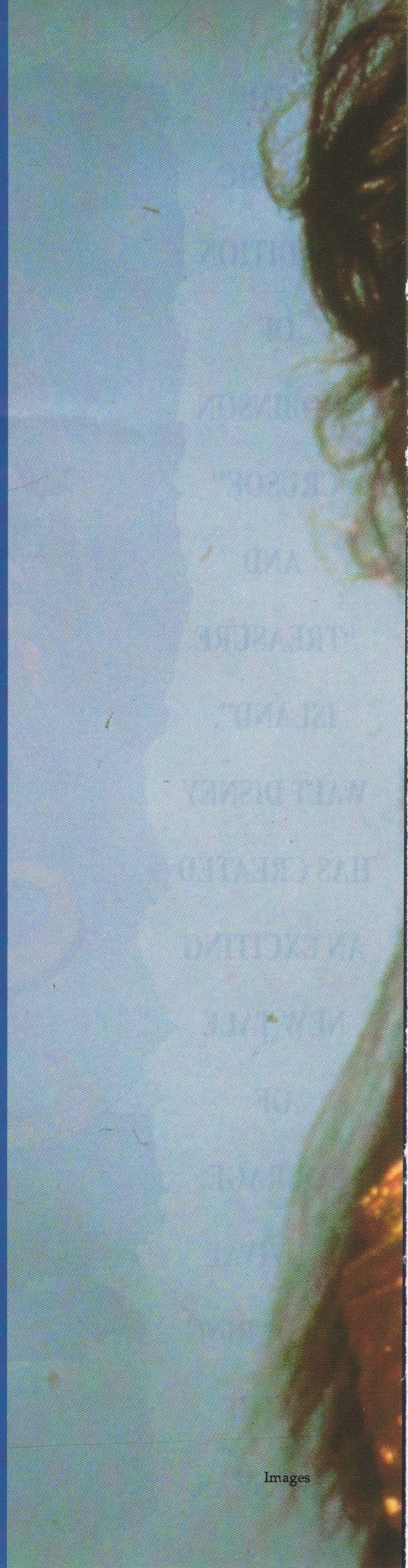
WG: No - that's what pays me! I like to be paid on time for good work. I did a film called *Clara's Heart*, which nobody saw, which was a great little film. I thought it was wonderful but then our studio [Warner Bros] didn't like it and the critics didn't like it and so they killed it. But it was a very nice little film. So I just take the best of what I can find and, fortunately, *Ghost* was one of the better ones.

IH: Why was the movie so popular?

WG: I suspect it's because the summer fare this year had to do with guys getting their hearts ripped out and eaten and buildings being blown up and blown up again and *Lethal Weapon 2, 3, 4 and 5*. I mean, it's all been about 5000 people dying! Now our body count is three.

This film also offers people the opportunity to believe its possible to keep the flame of love - not only with a lover, not only in a romantic sense, but you put this film in the context of parents that have passed away and it says that love stays. People only die if you forget them. Once they're forgotten then they're truly dead. But if you keep them here and you take the best of them, they're always with you. And people need that.

The film brings us back to the idea that it is possible that those we love are still here. That's why I think it works 'cos no-one's been touched like this in a long time. We





didn't know, we didn't even really know when we were doing it, how deeply it was going to touch us.

IH: You're known for making people laugh but you're also outspoken on many issues, like...

WG: The Right-To-Life people. I believe in right-to-life as well. I believe in a right-to-good-quality-life. I don't believe that people have the right to mentally batter or abuse a woman who has made a tough decision. Abortion is a hard decision to make and if you have had one it's not something you want to do on a weekly basis so, you know,

Somebody was telling me one of your towns [Nyngan, NSW] was flooded out a while ago. Now I also heard your federal government had just paid \$2 million for a painting but between the federal and the state governments they gave a quarter of a million dollars each to take care of this town. Something is wrong. Their priorities are wrong and the same thing is happening in the States. The world is like very small and all these guys all sit in a circle and say I don't know, shall we give some money to the homeless? Oh, I don't know, damn, damn, damn. It's strange. We must say to

Hollywood had a problem when they figured it out. There is racial tension everywhere. I mean, you have it in Australia. We have it here and racism, like prostitution, will always be here because there will always be someone who wants to be the master-planner and, as we saw with Germany - the previous Germany, we don't know what's coming with this one - that doesn't necessarily mean you're going to be safe. You know, just because it starts out like a white Disneyland doesn't mean it's going to end up that way. There's a great poem I don't really remember word-for-word but the idea of it is:

They came for the Jews and I sat there,
And they came for the communists and I sat there,
And they came for the woman and I sat there,
And they came for the children and I sat there,
And then they came for me.
That's my philosophy and that's what I preach and I will do that until I can't anymore.

IH: On the subject of Hollywood, did you enjoy making all your films?

the exception of two, have been great fun to make. It's been a shame to see what they've done to them, you know, because the movie-making business is a money-making business. There's no getting around that and in the beginning they thought I was going to be the answer to Eddie Murphy, you know, the female version and it's taken them a good five years to figure out that is probably not the case.

IH: You usually talk cleaner than him.

WG: No, I am just a different person, you know. I can punch people out with the best of them. There's something a little more to me, I think, that they are now starting to believe in so maybe that will reflect in the films I make and then again maybe not. You just never know.

Once people get over the fact that when you wash you come out the same way, they're more willing to sit and listen and say well, gee, you know, maybe you can do this. Best people for the job. Not black, not white. Just best people for the job. Steven Spielberg is a perfect example. He took the shot with me for *Color Purple* because he is a filmmaker, because he knew people and he made a movie about people that happened to be dark-skinned and he is a rarity, Mr Spielberg is. I don't want to be known as a black. I should rather be known as a human.

That's my big thing because then everyone can identify, you know. Everybody has hardships. Trouble knows no colour. AIDS doesn't know colour. You can have \$1 million and AIDS doesn't care, you know. So I should rather be known as just this human being who does weird stuff on occasion and on an occasion is



it's the kind of thing where I don't think you have the right to stand in front of an abortion clinic and berate women who are tense enough as it is.

I think if you're really pro-life, really truly, when the woman comes out of the clinic you say you know this was a hard decision but listen, come let's discuss ways so you don't have to come back. To me that's pro-life. I don't believe the people who call themselves pro-life really understand what it means. It's not enough to say have the baby and give it up for adoption. Getting black, Puerto Rican and Asian and, I'm sure, aboriginal children, adapted is very hard. People want nice little *Leave It To Beaver* babies, you know, and there are just not enough of them to go around.

IH: How far should involvement with causes extend?

WG: Look, I've had a lot of blessings, you know. Somebody up there is like looking out for me and I sort of feel the best thing I can do is try to pass it along. You gotta encourage people to look out for each other, not just "your" people or "their" people but "our" people. And our governments are so far away from reality.

our governments we are the priority because without us you have no government. You know, you don't exist without us, so help us look out for each other and that is my thing.

IH: There will always be needy people. Does this mean governments shouldn't buy art?

WG: No! No! I'm saying that when you have a city that's flooded and many, many people out of homes that's your priority. I love art. I buy art. But the priority of the government of a nation is it's people, museums will wait. The painting wasn't going anywhere and if somebody else bought it they could get another one. But those people had no homes and if you're going to haggle about who's going to give a quarter of million dollars and you've spent \$2 million on a painting, that's offensive. No, the government should buy art. Art is a wonderful thing. It keeps us going, but the priority is - and should always be - first and foremost, the people who live in the land.

IH: What about black issues?

WG: Well, there is no way to hide that I am black. People say yes, she is definitely black. Oh by God she's black. Even

somewhat amusing, you know. With the hair, you know!

IH: *At school, were you the class clown?*

WG: No, I came from straight theatre, straight like Shakespeare's stuff, and I started playing with some impro people who wanted to learn more about acting for their impro and I just had the idea of getting out and saying just whatever I thought and when I was out there it was a great idea so we exchanged trainings and that's sort of how I got to bind both.

IH: *What's the craziest thing you've ever done on stage, you know, a real embarrassment to your Shakespeare tutor?*

WG: Oh, gosh, do you know who the Rockettes are? We have in New York City a place called Radio City Music Hall and there has been a dance troupe there. It's been a deco hall. It's been there forever and these women who are all the same size, all the legs are the same, they're all white, they all look the same and they do these precision moves except this year it was my turn! I joined them right up there on stage! The man who created the Rockettes turned 90 this year but he didn't see the show or he'd have had a massive coronary. His feeling was that there should not be a dark Rockette ever. Never. White women only, because the idea is that they all should look the same.

Well, I kicked with the best of them. Did it to raise money for charity. There were 30 comics in all. We called it *Comic Relief*. The Radio City Music Hall has a 5,000-seat house which we sold out and the take from that was \$750,000. The take from the callings was \$7 million. It was pretty far out. The sign at the dressing room said: "Leave your agent and your ego at the door." Even Dustin Hoffman joined us. All the problems seemed insurmountable at first but afterwards when they said \$7 million...and that wasn't matched by the government, they weren't giving us any money, that's the American people and it was amazing.

IH: *How can you choose which causes to support like that?*

WG: Children are my primary issue because I worry about them, because they are the future and I don't understand how people can let kids die from a disease or go hungry in the streets or any of that stuff. Families. Things that have to do with human rights are real important to me because being who I am and watching the people who come before me I have it much easier than some of the other folks that preceded me and I owe it to their memory to do the right stuff by them. And also this thing within me, you know.

Five years ago I was collecting welfare, I had a little kid and nobody...You know, have you ever felt that welfare people were people that just didn't want to work. I did want to work, I did, and there are a lot of

people out there who want to work and I don't like the image that is presented of them and so I want to work hard to help that go away.

I'm sick to death of the AIDS issue being a sexual issue and not a health issue. For God's sake, people are dying. What does it matter at this point where it came from? It doesn't matter and I don't understand the reticence on the part of my government in particular. I want to change the world, I want to do that, I believe that I can as one person, I believe that I can help to do that and I am a famous person and that gives me a little more leeway but when I go I want them to say yeah she was here, she was weird, but she gave something back.

It's real important to me. I've got a grandkid. I want a good world for her. I don't want her to have to go to a museum to see what a whale looked like. This is my lifetime, this is my world, and I want it right and I want it and this is the only way I know how to do it. It's all I can do but I'm trying. You won't be able to use this, but sometimes it's like pissing in the wind. Er, sorry Bob Dylan.

If any of those gentlemen in your Parliament House were under water you could best believe there would be vacuum cleaners sucking that water out of there. And that goes across the world. It's not just in Australia, it's not just here in the States, it's all over and I think they're just so far away from the people. Your life will never be the same when you hold a baby with AIDS. It won't be. It will change your life, it will make you look at things so differently because people who have only been here two or three years that die. I am sorry but it just too bizarre for me.

IH: *You said Ghost was successful partly because it has a body count of only three - has on-screen violence numbed us to the violence around us?*

WG: Well, you see, I grew up with - do you know *The Three Stooges* in Australia? OK, I'm not a particularly violent person. Those guys beat the shit out of each other. There are degrees that I have as a person. I happen to like the *Nightmare On Elm Street* series. I like Freddy Krueger. OK, I do. When I go to those movies I want Freddy to get those kids there because they are some of the dumbest people in the world. I yell Freddy, Freddy, in the garden! There are, however, films out with just too much. I think there are some films that promote excessive violence against women in particular. Violent societies are one thing but women in particular, you know, the mass mugger. The guy with the chainsaw, him I could do without. Freddy Krueger is funny. I don't know, I'm mixed on it. I don't need to see some guy bite out the heart of his wife. Kind of gross.

IH: *Was it the woman's role which attracted you to Burglar?*

WG: No, it was never meant for a woman. It was written for a man. I know a woman

played the part as a pretty strong character. Well, you know, women and men are a strange combination. I believe there are a few things, well, probably the only thing that women can't do - and they can if they try really hard - is stand up to go to the bathroom. That's really the only difference I see. So I will go after things that no-one would ever consider me for because they think well, no, a woman would never do this. Well, of course, they will and I did it and had a good time doing it.

IH: *Does it always work?*

WG: Unfortunately, *Fatal Beauty*, which started out as a real gritty movie about drug use in LA, turned into this really bad version of *Beverly Hills Cop*. We couldn't even do a good version of *Beverly Hills Cop*, like everything was awful. And they took my love scene away. I finally get a hunk and I finally get to kiss the guy on the floor. Then they take it away. I kissed a woman in the first film, *Shook Avery*, I kissed her. She looked a little mannish but she wasn't, she was a woman.

IH: *What lofty things do you aspire to?*

WG: I aspire to having a steady job. That's my major thing, to have a pretty steady gig and make a little money and have some fun. I don't ever want more than that really. To have gotten as far as this is amazing. I woke up one day and there she was. You are not allowed to make mistakes when you are somebody like a *Cosby* or *Michael Jackson* or any of the other people who rise above it all. You're not allowed to be human, you know. Er,

I'm a flatulent sort of girl. I just don't know that I could ever get to the point where I could only be surrounded by people that high. It's kind of scary, you know. The makers, whoever they are, have their own plan for me. I just sort of go where they tell me.

Be in the running for a spectacular major *Ghost* prize that consists of: a copy of the video, a poster, soundtrack cassette, keyring, mug, sloppy joe, jacket, *Righteous Brothers Reunion* cassette featuring *Unchained Melody* (compliments of BMG Records) or one of five runner-up prizes of a copy of the movie and a poster simply by ringing the number below.

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